



*Association  
of American  
Colleges and  
Universities*

# Is College Worth the Time and Money?

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**IT DEPENDS ON WHOM  
YOU ASK**

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## INTRODUCTION

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As students face rising tuition costs, increasing debt burdens, and uncertain employment prospects, a central question arises: Is college worth it? Although empirical research consistently finds that a college education is a [profitable investment](#), media stories continue to cast doubt on the value of the degree.

Findings from two recent studies provide compelling insights into not just how different groups of Americans view college education as a whole, but also the degree to which there is agreement on the aspects of a college education that matter for future success—namely, career success. Is college worth the time and money? Are students learning what matters most for workforce preparation? Is there consensus on the virtues of being “well-rounded,” or is it time to emphasize specific job skills? And at a time of renewed focus on civic engagement, what role should higher education play in supporting communities and democracy?

To address these questions, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Bipartisan Policy Center partnered with Morning Consult to conduct a survey of 2,200 American adults. The survey was administered March 3-5, 2021. The findings are presented below, alongside results from [AAC&U’s recent survey](#) of employers. Together these surveys highlight the nuances of public opinion on higher education—what is most highly valued about it and by whom, as well as its relevance to workforce success.

## AMERICANS LARGELY AGREE THAT A COLLEGE DEGREE IS STILL WORTH IT. YET EMPLOYERS ARE NEARLY UNANIMOUS.

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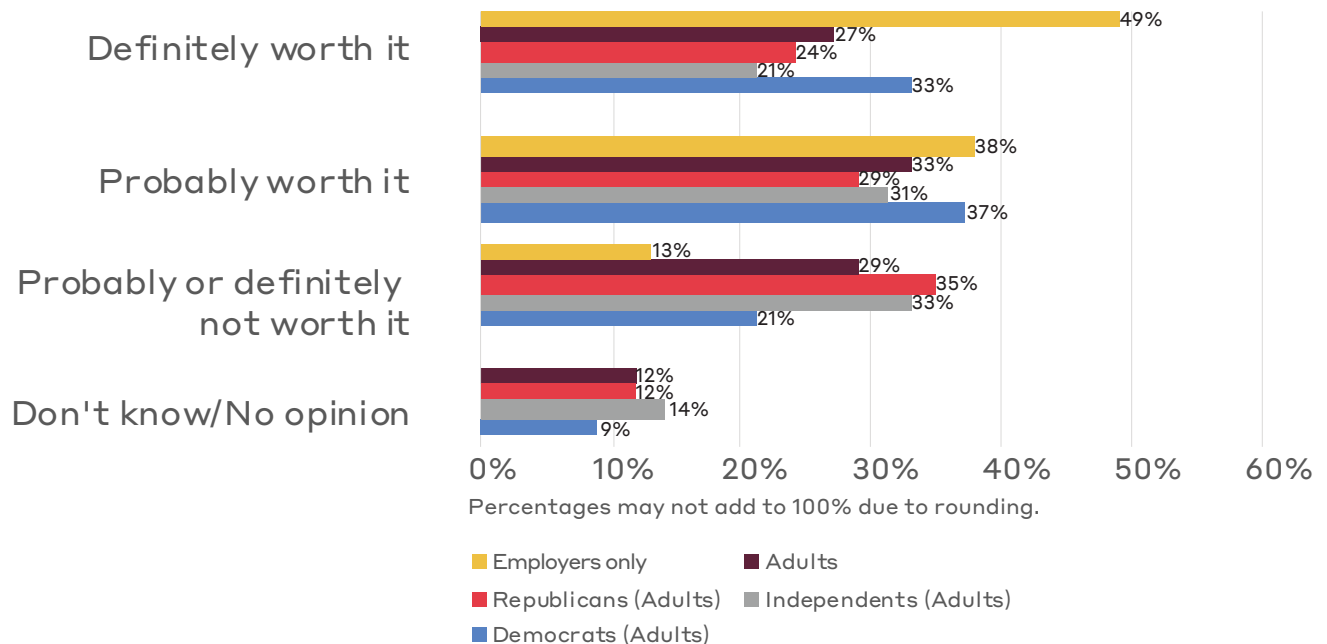
Judging from the persistent public narrative asserting that a college degree is overpriced, overvalued, and saddling students with lingering debt, one would think higher education has an image problem. Despite the prevailing rhetoric, however, a majority (60%) of Americans still believe that a college degree is worth the time and money involved. But if those Americans also happen to be employers, nearly nine in 10 (87%) of them believe that a college degree is “definitely” or “probably” worth the investment.

Perspectives on the value of investing in a college degree also vary by income level, educational level, and political affiliation. Approximate-

ly three-quarters of American adults with an annual income greater than \$100K (74%) or who have a bachelor's degree (73%) view a college degree as “definitely” or “probably” worth it, compared with only about half of respondents without a college degree (51%) or who have an annual income below \$50K (52%). Similarly, respondents who identified as Democrats (70%) were much more likely to believe a college degree is “definitely” or “probably” worth it than those who identified as Republicans (53%) or independents (52%).

Generational differences also influence perceptions of higher education. Though public trust in social institutions, such as education and government, has been declining for decades, younger generations of Americans who weathered the economic collapse of 2008 and have come of age in a highly polarized political climate, demonstrate even greater distrust than other age groups. Nevertheless, Gen Zers (those born between 1997 and 2012) and millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) were more likely to believe college is “definitely” or “probably” worth the time and money (61% and 63%, respectively), as compared to Gen Xers (those born between 1965 and 1980) and baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) (54% and 59%, respectively).<sup>a</sup>

## A College Degree or Credential Today Is...



<sup>a</sup> Some differences across generations are within the margin of error.

## **BEING WELL-ROUNDED MATTERS AS MUCH AS BEING TRAINED IN SPECIFIC FIELDS, INCLUDING STEM**

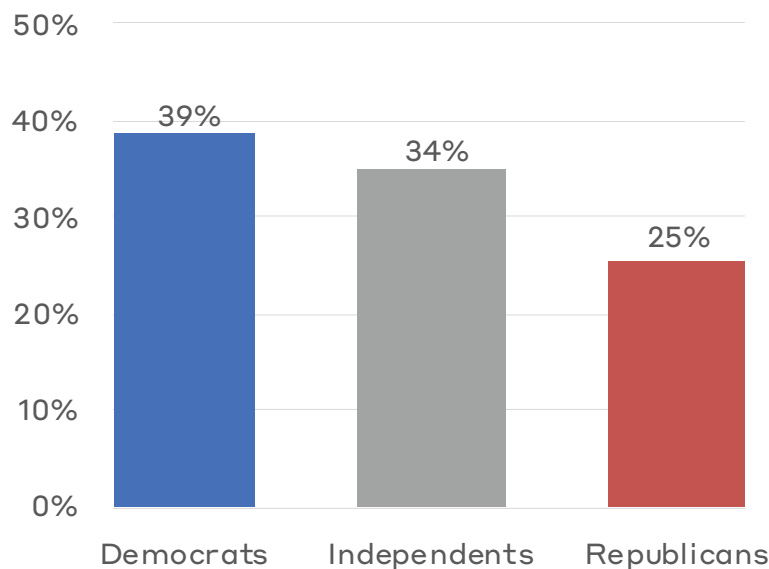
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When weighing an education that enables one to think broadly and gain a variety of skills versus narrow training for a specific job, Americans largely choose both. Sixty-two percent of American adults reported that it is very important for higher education institutions to provide students with “a well-rounded education” in order to prepare them for long-term career success. A nearly identical share (63%) also said it was very important for higher education to equip students with “adequate technical skills for employment.” Similarly, in AAC&U’s survey of employers, identical percentages (52%) of employers indicated that a well-rounded education was very important for long-term career success as was obtaining job-specific technical skills.

Though baby boomers (64%) and Gen Zers (63%) agreed that a well-rounded education is very important for career success, they differed dramatically in how they view the need for technical skills. More than two-thirds of baby boomers (69%) indicated that receiving adequate technical skills for employment is very important for career success, while just over half (56%) of Gen Zers thought the same. When it comes to political affiliation, however, a higher percentage of Democrats (67%) noted that it is very important for colleges and universities to provide a well-rounded education for career success, as compared with Republicans (55%) and independents (61%).

Finally, despite growing emphasis within education and in the labor market on STEM training, higher percentages of American adults and employers think a well-rounded education is more important for career success than “exposure to STEM fields.” Only a third of adults (33%) and less than half of employers (45%) believe that exposure to STEM fields is very important for preparing students for long-term career success. A larger share of Democrats (39%) viewed exposure to STEM fields as very important for long-term career success compared to just a quarter of Republicans (25%).

Percent of Americans by Political Affiliation  
Who Believe STEM Exposure Is Very  
Important for Long-Term Career Success



## AMERICANS LARGELY AGREE ON THE SKILLS HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD PROVIDE FOR WORKFORCE SUCCESS

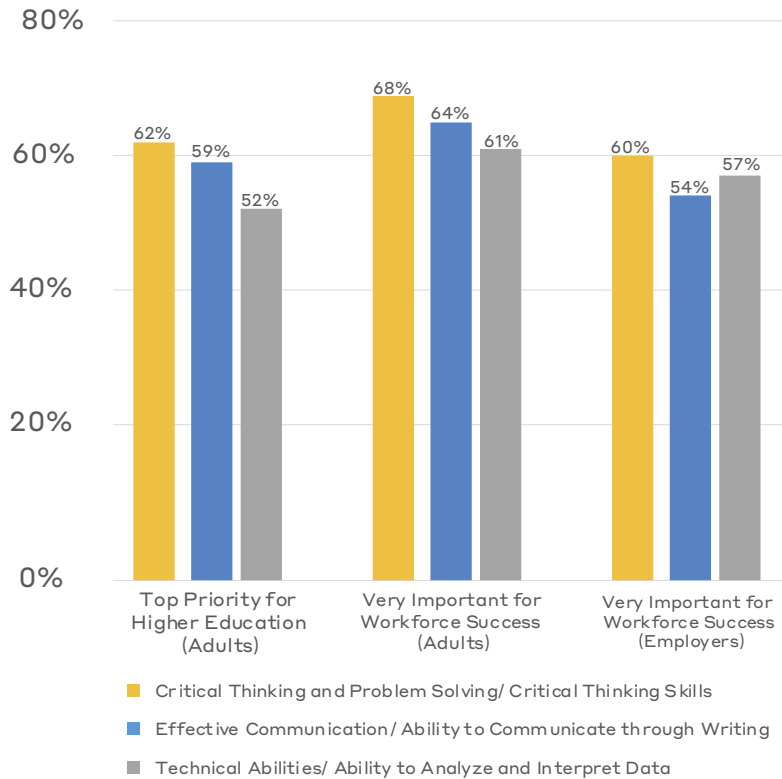
When asked which skills are very important for success in the workforce, the highest percentages of American adults identified critical thinking and problem solving (68%) and effective communication (64%), such as writing and speaking skills. Employers similarly ranked critical thinking (60%), problem-solving (54%), and written communication (54%) as among the most important skills college graduates should be able to demonstrate.

But perceptions of the skills needed for workforce success also varied by political affiliation and age. Democrats (72%) were more likely than Republicans (63%) to rank critical thinking as very important for workforce success. However, there was a nearly identical estimation of the importance of technical skills across political affiliations: 61% of Americans who identified as Democrat or independent indicated that technical skills were very important, only slightly higher than those who identified as Republican (59%).

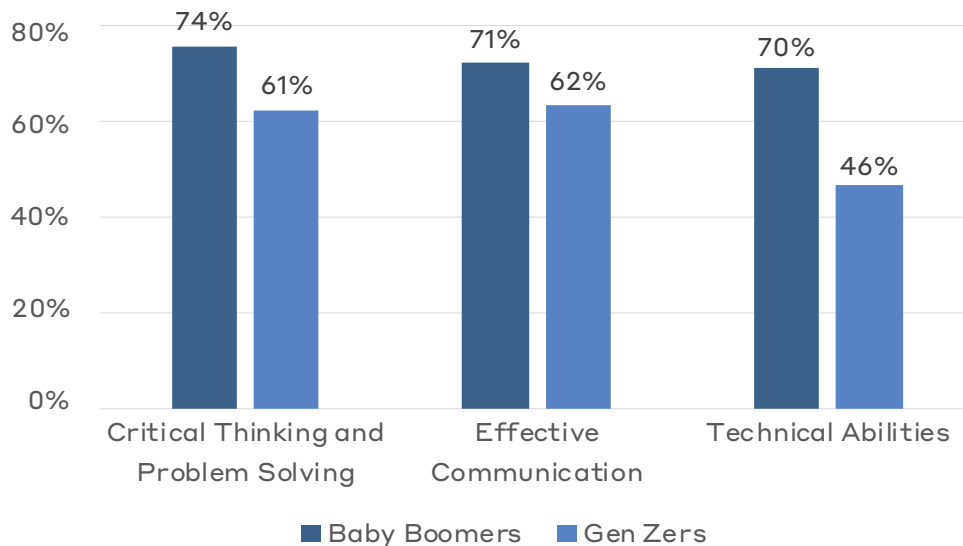
Across the board, our survey found that more baby boomers than Gen Zers believe critical thinking and problem-solving, communication, and aptitudes and dispositions (including empathy and work ethic) are important for workforce success. The share of baby boomers who ranked these skills as very important was, on average, 10 percentage

points higher than the youngest respondents. The biggest gap, however, between baby boomers and Gen Zers was in how each generation viewed the importance of technical abilities for workplace success; 70% of baby boomers indicated that technical skills are very important, as compared to only 46% of Gen Zers.

## Beliefs of Americans and Employers on the Importance of Selected Skills



## Percent of Americans by Generation Who Believe that a Selected Skill Is Very Important for Workforce Success

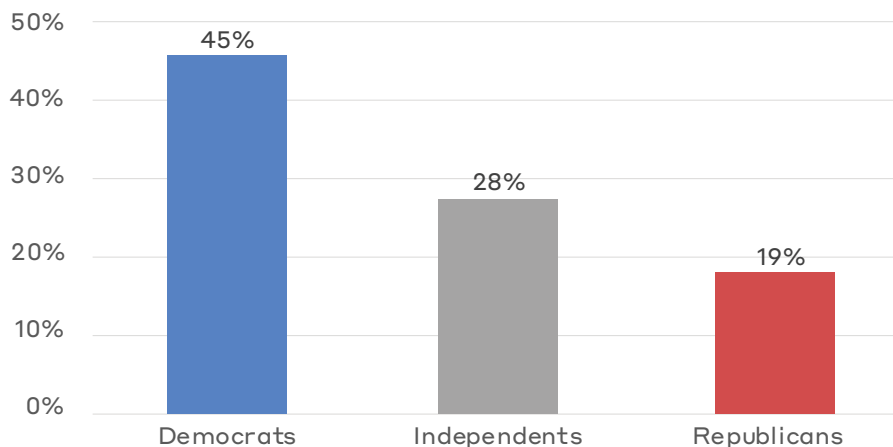


## SHOULD HIGHER EDUCATION PRIORITIZE CIVIC LEARNING FOR WORKFORCE SUCCESS? IT DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK

Despite a year of political turmoil and racial reckoning, only about one in three American adults thinks that civic learning and engagement, including providing an understanding of the democratic process, should be top priorities for higher education (29%) or are very important for success in today's workforce (35%). A similarly low percentage (32%) of Americans believes that higher education should foster a sense of social justice for students as a necessary element for long-term career success. Additionally, only two in five employers (41%) indicated that it is very important for recent college graduates to demonstrate proficiency in civic skills or civic engagement. This was nearly 20 percentage points lower than employers' ratings of highly ranked skills, such as critical thinking (60%) and teamwork (62%).

As with other higher education and workforce topics, views on the role of civic learning and social justice illustrate a partisan divide. A much higher share of Americans who identified as Democrats view civic learning and engagement as very important for workforce success (41%), as compared to those who identified as Republicans (30%). Democrats (45%) were also more likely than Republicans (19%) to view fostering a sense of social justice as very important for long-term career success.

Percent of Americans by Political Affiliation  
Who Believe that Fostering a Sense of  
Social Justice Is Very Important for  
Long-Term Career Success





Generational differences are particularly nuanced when it comes to evaluating the importance of emphasizing civic learning and social justice within a college education and for workforce success. Though civic skills are not valued as highly as other skills like critical thinking, regardless of age, there are some indications of a growing divide in how civic learning may be valued in the years to come. As noted previously, wide gaps were found between baby boomers and Gen Zers in the importance each placed on various skills, with views on the importance of technical skills constituting the largest gap. Conversely, the smallest generational difference was found in the percentage of baby boomers and Gen Zers who indicated that civic learning and engagement are very important for workforce success (36% and 30%, respectively).

Yet, when asked to rank the following sets of skills and abilities based on—their relative importance for success in today’s workforce—technical skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving; effective communication, personal aptitudes, and dispositions; and civic learning and engagement—a markedly higher percentage of Gen Zers (19%) than baby boomers (8%) ranked civic learning and engagement either first or second. Moreover, when American adults were asked whether they would support higher education working to promote racial equity, younger adults signaled much higher levels of support than older Americans. While two in five adults, overall, indicated strong support for institutions of higher education working to promote racial equity, more than half of Gen Zers (52%) and more than a third of baby boomers (37%) agreed.

Age differences among employers also signal potential generational shifts in how civic skills may be valued in the years to come. In AAC&U’s employer survey, those employers under 40 years of age were found to value civic skills and experiences significantly more than older employers. Specifically, the percentage of employers who indicated that civic, “global,” and “social justice-oriented” experiences are very important components of a college education was, on average, 20 points higher among employers under the age of 40, as compared with employers aged 50 and older.

## CONCLUSION

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So, is college worth it? Most Americans say yes. But it still depends on whom you ask, what you ask, and how you ask it. Though more employers than Americans overall believe a college degree is worth the investment of time and money, there is a fairly consistent alignment of views with regard to the skills that are essential for workforce success.

There is also broad consensus on the need to balance breadth of learning with narrow job training. Both general and specific training matter to nearly everyone we asked. However, there is less consensus that a college education should emphasize civic learning and engagement. Democrats and younger Americans are more likely to see civic engagement and social justice as important outcomes for higher education. As they age into positions of influence in industry, government, and popular culture, Gen Zers and millennials may have a profound effect in placing far greater emphasis on the relevance of civic skill-building as an essential element of learning and career success.

*Morning Consult surveyed 2,200 adults in early March 2021. The surveys were conducted online, and the data was weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on age, educational attainment, gender, race, and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of +/- 2%. Click [here](#) for the survey crosstabs. Click [here](#) for the analysis memo.*

*AAC&U partnered with Hanover Research to conduct a survey of 496 employers in 2020. The methodology and full survey results can be found [here](#).*





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AAC&U is the leading national association dedicated to advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,000 member institutions-- including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size.

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